

Managing Fears with Effective Communication

Creating a Crisis Communication Plan That Serves All Stakeholders

THE FIELD OF EDUCATION ABROAD invests considerable attention and resources to risk management and crisis response measures. Beyond taking steps to mitigate risks and manage actual crises, education abroad and international risk management professionals are increasingly devoting time and energy into managing the fears of their stakeholders—students, parents, faculty, and even administrators—who may be influenced by the perception that international travel is a high-risk endeavor.

Many people often struggle with a perception gap when it comes to understanding the reality of risk in international settings—the difference between actual risk and a given individual’s perception of the risk involved. Dru Simmons, international risk manager at Ohio State University uses the proverb “Because we focused on the snake, we missed the scorpion” to illustrate this discrepancy.

“Data show that for every person killed by a snake, 10 are killed by scorpion stings. Yet far more fear is focused on snakes,” he says. “In international travel, safety, terrorism, political unrest, and natural disasters are the snakes. Transportation accidents, drownings, and accidental falls are the scorpions. All deserve attention and planning, but often the ratio of concern and preventative action is not balanced correctly.”

Fear Management

In addition to handling student crises, international educators must manage stakeholders’ fears, both proactively and reactively.

“Putting time and effort into specific strategies that will proactively address the concerns of each of our constituent groups... might mean you need to spend less energy responding to fears during an actual crisis,” says Maureen Gordon, director of health, safety, and security at Arcadia University. “Take a critical look at when and how you are engaging with stakeholders in advance to educate them on what measures you take to mitigate risk and what resources you have in place to respond if an incident does occur.”

Those measures and resources should be clearly defined in the institutional crisis response plan and shared in whole, or in part, with the various stakeholders. The very act of establishing a crisis response plan is a response to fear—the fear of not being prepared, the fear of something bad happening to students, or the fear of litigation or bad publicity.

Crisis response is often contextualized as a cycle that begins with preparation, moves through the management of the crisis itself, and continues to reflection and process updates before the

cycle begins again. Crisis response measures should be framed for each stage of the cycle.

Here are the 5 Cs that education abroad offices can adopt to establish a plan for crises and risks abroad. A well-established crisis response plan should incorporate each of the elements.

Calm

A TED Talk by author Tim Ferriss examines goal-setting by first defining one’s fears. To achieve a goal, he says, one must understand what causes emotions to get in the way of achieving that goal. He suggests that the most reliable tool to prevent “emotional free fall” is stoicism, or, in the context of crisis communication, calm.

Calmness means many things to different people, but it can be particularly useful in times when fear drives behaviors and decisions. This is not a practice often discussed in education abroad, but it should be. How does emotional reactivity—or the choice to remain calm—impact communication? Are staff members taking time to process their fears and biases, or to consider how their tone and reaction affect the tone and reaction of others?

Collaboration

In creating a plan, it is important to leverage expertise from across campus to holistically support crises and ease campus fears. For example, campus administration, legal counsel, the counseling center, and the dean of students should be active players in guiding crisis response efforts.

“There is a temptation to think international programs are unique, which compels international offices to create special protocol,” says Simmons. “However, an international emergency response plan should be aligned with institutional protocol and should only deviate at the point the context of a specific incident abroad cannot be addressed by local protocol and resources.”

International educators should reach out to these departments in advance to develop a plan to collaborate, as well as seek expertise when needed. Putting the plan in writing, with agreement from all parties, ensures its use as the go-to resource during crises.

“It’s also important to practice your emergency response plan regularly, so that everyone who might be involved in responding feels prepared and confident in their role when an emergency happens,” says Gordon. A calm and consistent response from the institution can often produce more effective responses and help to manage fears.

Consistency

Any crisis response plan must be implemented consistently, regardless of personal reactions or biases from event to event. This can be difficult, especially when multiple crises occur at once. Consistency with crisis communication is imperative so that stakeholders learn to trust the system—that communication will flow to them when the education abroad office deems it to be relevant.

Consistency tempers stakeholders’ reactions so that, in the future, there is less time spent being reactionary to leadership, faculty, or even parents who may be calling to ask about an incident that happened abroad. Establish consistency so stakeholders know to expect the same results every time.

Credibility

When the education abroad office models calm and consistent practices, it builds credibility with both internal and external stakeholders—which is important political capital to have, especially during a time of crisis.

In thinking about a campus or organization’s culture, consider if the education abroad office is perceived by others as trained specialists in international crisis communication. Think of ways that the office can leverage its crisis communication plan, national best practices, and NAFSA resources to assert its credibility.

Closing the Loop

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, staff should make sure there is time set aside after each incident to honestly reflect and debrief with collaborators. Closing the loop on crisis communication allows EA professionals to continually refine and improve their office’s response and ensure appropriate process updates.

Beyond campus, education abroad staff should be utilizing, benchmarking, and contributing to collective resources within professional networks. Imparting individual experiences, lessons learned, and expertise within the field helps to further collective knowledge of managing fears.



The role of international educators encompasses managing fears and expectations of concerned stakeholders, and the most effective communication methods begin well before a crisis occurs. Modeling these five Cs and implementing a proactive crisis communication plan can help bridge the perception gap many stakeholders have regarding travel abroad. Additionally, education abroad offices can leverage their effective crisis communication practices to build credibility on campus, foster interdepartmental collaboration, and, most importantly, continue to ease the ongoing fears of stakeholders. ■

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RESOURCES

- Risk Assessment and Crisis Management in Education Abroad free resources: bit.ly/2GHBtN7
- Crisis Management for Education Abroad*: bit.ly/2BzUU7p
- “Managing Education Abroad Fears with Communication” e-Learning Seminar: bit.ly/2MUqEs8
- “Risk Management in Education Abroad” e-Learning Series: bit.ly/2SDXrad
- “Risk Assessment and Crisis Management in Education Abroad” Workshop: bit.ly/2Gzbd07